REYNOLDS AND THE DECISION TO FIGHT

by L. Patrick Nelson

Isaac Ridgeway Trimble was, on the afternoon of Saturday, June 27, 1863, a major general without a command. He had sustained a severe leg wound in the Second Manassas Campaign ten months before, and now, though barely recuperated, again sought duty with the Army of Northern Virginia. That army had been moving north for more than three weeks, carrying out what would prove to be, to this day, the last large-scale invasion of the United States.

Gen. Robert E. Lee had written Trimble on June 23, stating his desire that Trimble assume command of the Valley District with headquarters at Winchester, if the recovering officer was unable to take the field.[1] But Trimble wanted no rear-area assignment. So he had ridden over from Winchester on this drizzly summer afternoon to meet Lee near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.[2] Years later Trimble recalled the commanding general's gracious concern for his health and his regret that he had no combat command available. But the crucial part of the conversation, for our purposes, concerns Lee's strategic thinking. These were Lee's words, as recollected by Trimble:

> Our army is in good spirits, not over fatigued, and can be concentrated on any one point in twenty-four hours or less. I have not yet heard that the enemy have crossed the Potomac, and am waiting to hear from General Stuart. When they hear where we are they will make forced marches to interpose their forces between us and Baltimore and Philadelphia. They will come up, probably through Frederick—, broken down with hunger and hard marching, strung out on a long line and much demoralized, when they come into Pennsylvania. I shall throw an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it, follow up the success, drive one corps back on another, and by successive repulses and surprises before they can concentrate; create a panic and virtually destroy the army.[3]

The next night, Lee learned from Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's scout, Henry Thomas Harrison, that the Army of the Potomac had crossed its namesake river and was in Maryland.[4] The effect that this intelligence had on Confederate plans is best stated in Lee's report:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L. Patrick Nelson is a graduate of the University of Minnesota Business and Law Schools. He is an officer and longtime member of the Twin Cities Civil War Round Table and has recently retired from his position as a legal editor. He wishes to thank his wife Connie as well as Dr. Harry W. Pfanz for their encouragement and assistance.

> [O]n the night of the 28th, information was received . . . that the Federal Army . . . was advancing northward, and that the head of the column had reached the South Mountain. As our communications with the Potomac were thus menaced, it was resolved to prevent his farther progress in that direction by concentrating our army on the east side of the mountains. Accordingly, Longstreet and Hill were directed to proceed from Chambersburg to Gettysburg, to which point General Ewell was also instructed to march from Carlisle.[5]

Whether Lee's concern for his communications was justified or not, his headquarters in Chambersburg became a beehive of activity as couriers dashed off with the orders that would reunite the army.[6] On Monday morning, June 29,

1. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 27, pt. 3, p. 923. (Hereinafter cited as *OR*. All subsequent references are from series 1.)
2. Thomas L. Elmore, "A Meteorological and Astronomical Chronology of the Gettysburg Campaign," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 13 (July 1995): 8
3. *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 52 vols. (Richmond: Southern Historical Society, 1876-1952), 26:121. (Hereinafter cited as *SHSP*.)
4. Whether Harrison's first name was James or Henry depends upon the source consulted. The weight of authority favors the latter. See Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg, The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 3; Time-Life Books, *Spies, Scouts and Raiders: Irregular Operations* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1985), photograph on p. 54; Tony Trimble, "Harrison: Spying for Longstreet at Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 17 (July 1997): 17-19.
5. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 2, p. 307.
6. Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) p. 186. Coddington convincingly argues that the threat to Confederate communications was minimal. Of all the books written which cover the Gettysburg campaign as a whole, Coddington's is the best.

Longstreet's First Corps and Lt. Gen. Ambrose P. Hill's Third Corps were in the vicinity of army headquarters at Chambersburg, approximately twenty-five miles west-northwest of Gettysburg. Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell's Second Corps, however, which had brilliantly spearheaded the march north into Pennsylvania, was scattered far to the east. Maj. Gen. Jubal Early's division was at York on the morning of June 29, about thirty miles east-northeast of Gettysburg, while the divisions of Maj. Gens. Robert Rodes and Edward Johnson had spent the night of June 28 at Carlisle, approximately twenty-five miles north of the town.

Three corps of the Army of the Potomac had crossed into Maryland on June 25. That same morning army commander Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker directed Maj. Gen. John F. Reynolds to assume command of two of these units, the Third and Eleventh Corps, in addition to his own First Corps.[7] This order placed in command of a substantial portion of the Federal army an officer of outstanding reputation who, as will be seen, was more than anxious to cross swords with the invaders of his native state. Our purpose here will be to attempt to determine whether Reynolds' decision to give battle at Gettysburg was a reasonable one under the circumstances, or whether it was fraught with potentially disastrous consequences to the Union cause.[8]

John Fulton Reynolds was born September 20, 1820, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, fifty-five miles east of Gettysburg. He graduated from West Point in 1841 and received two brevets in the Mexican War. Thereafter he served on the frontier and was commandant of cadets at the Military Academy when the war began. He was made a brigadier general of volunteers, and performed ably on the Peninsula at Mechanicsville. The next day, June 27, 1862, at Gaines' Mill, when the Federal front finally collapsed after repeated Confederate attacks, Reynolds was separated from his command and captured.[9] This event led to an extraordinary request. During the early stages of the Peninsula Campaign Reynolds was, for a sixteen-day period, military governor of Fredericksburg. When news of his capture reached the city, a petition directed to the Confederate Secretary of War was signed by numerous prominent citizens, stating in part:

> . . . General Reynolds exhibited . . . a determination to so conduct his military command here as to conserve and protect . . . the personal rights and domestic comforts of the citizens and thus mitigate . . . the evils and annoyances which are incident to such an occupation. Your own military experience will suggest to you how materially such conduct as this on the part of a commanding officer could avail in saving our citizens from the countless ills which an unbridled and licentious soldiery might inflict upon a helpless population. . . . [W]e do feel that inasmuch as when we were prisoners in the hands of General Reynolds we received from him a treatment distinguished by a marked and considerate respect for our opinions and feelings, it becomes us to use our feeble influence in invoking for him, now a prisoner of our Government, a treatment as kind and considerate as was extended by him to us. We would therefore hope that he might be placed upon parole. . . .[10]

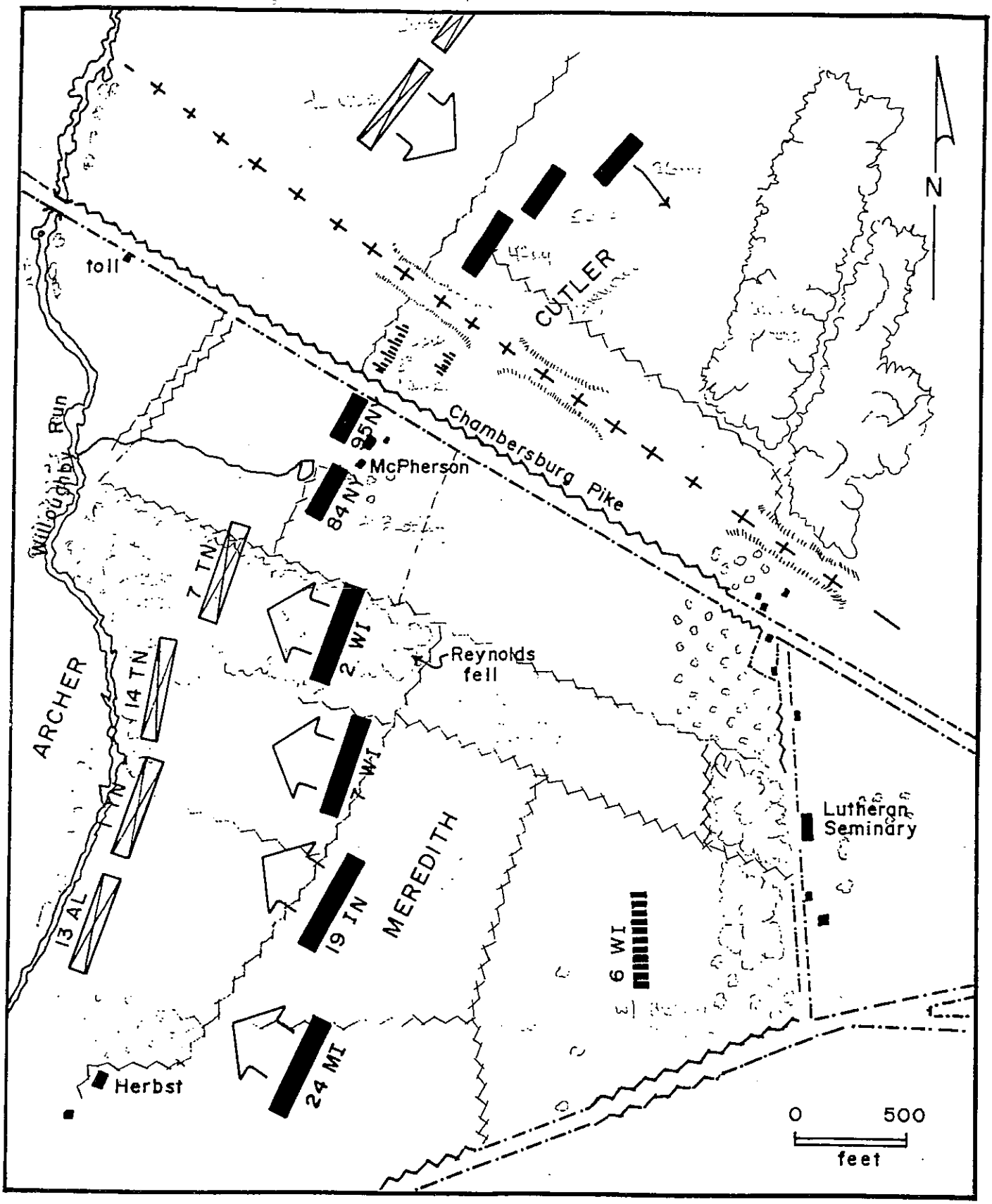
Reynolds was not the type of officer to issue orders and then retire to his tent while they were carried out. Col. Charles Wainwright, commander of the First Corps artillery brigade, who served with Reynolds from Fredericksburg to Gettysburg, wrote: "Though Doubleday is supposed to be in command of the corps (Reynolds now directing the left wing of three corps) all our orders come from Reynolds direct, and he looks as closely as ever after everything himself."[11]

But Wainwright did not condemn such behavior out of hand, as the following devastating comparison between Reynolds and Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside clearly shows. Recalling events leading up to the Petersburg mine explosion in July, 1864, he observed:

> . . . Burnside replied that as a matter of the first importance now was to keep the enemy ignorant of any special movement on our side, he would not cut the trees down until the mine was exploded. . . . The consequence was . . . that the trees were not cut at all, and this battery . . . was unable to fire . . . in that direction. How easy it would have been for Burnside to send an officer out to listen if the chopping could be heard even so far off as his own lines! . . . How different he is from Reynolds, who went himself out to our skirmish line at Fredericksburg while I withdrew Stewart's battery, so as to be sure to know if any sound of the move could reach the enemy.[12]

Reynolds was exchanged on August 13, 1862. Eight days later he was named to command the division of Pennsylvania

7. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, pp. 305, 306.
8. The author recognizes that there are numerous contenders for the honor of choosing the Federal position at Gettysburg. Besides Reynolds, arguments have been advanced on behalf of Buford, Howard, Hancock, etc. It would seem, however, for reasons later set forth, that the crucial decision was Reynolds'. Buford could not have succeeded in holding the McPherson's Ridge position without the support of Reynolds' infantry. A good case can be made for the proposition that once Reynolds called for reinforcements, and these were set in motion toward Gettysburg, it really mattered not what Howard, Hancock, or anyone else did. Even politics thrust its ugly head into the question. See Gary G. Lash "The Congressional Resolution of Thanks for the Federal Victory at Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 12 (January 1995): 85-96
9. Edward J. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg: A Biography of General John F. Reynolds* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1958), pp. 96, 97.
10. *OR*, vol. 27, pp. 795, 796.
11. Charles S. Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle, the Personal Journals of Colonel Charles Wainwright, 1861-1865*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 229.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 448.



Map by John Heiser

The fighting on McPherson's Ridge on the morning of July 1, 1863.

Reserves in which he had led a brigade on the Peninsula.[13] He was prominent at Second Manassas, defending Henry Hill in gallant fashion until Longstreet's troops gave up their attacks in the gathering darkness.[14] His developing career was sidetracked, however, when Governor Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania, seeking an officer to command the state volunteer militia as Lee prepared to cross the Potomac, convinced the Lincoln Administration to name Reynolds to the post. It was a frustrating assignment for a no-nonsense West Pointer, and Reynolds had all he could handle in attempting to make soldiers of very green material.[15] So he missed Antietam, but was named temporary commander of the First Corps upon his return to the army. This he led with distinction at Fredericksburg, his troops effecting the only penetration of the Confederate lines. He led the corps again at Chancellorsville and was outspoken in his disgust at Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's handling of the army which, though it outnumbered Lee two to one, retreated back across the Rappahannock after sustaining more than seventeen thousand casualties.

On May 31, 1863, Reynolds turned over his command to Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday and departed for Washington. While some of the details are still obscure, President Lincoln may have, at this time, tendered command of the Army of the Potomac to Reynolds, who declined the offer.[16] Colonel Wainwright shed further light on this episode when he wrote: "General Reynolds told me today [June 29] that the command of this army was offered to him when he was summoned up to Washington a month ago; but he refused it, because to use his own expression, 'he was unwilling to take Burnside's and Hooker's leavings.' I learn too that it was mainly on Reynolds' recommendation that General Meade received his appointment. . . ."[17]

Why would Reynolds refuse this extraordinary opportunity? Simply because he strongly opposed the manipulation of the army from Washington. He had written to his sisters the previous August as the army was being withdrawn ftom the Peninsula: ". . . I think the whole movement from the Peninsula wrong and if the army is to be managed from Washington, I am afraid there will be nothing but failures as there have been formerly. No one can conduct a campaign at a distance from the field or without being in the actual presence of the operating armies."[18] It appears that Reynolds stated to the President that he would accept the command only if he could be free from the orders of General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck, and that Lincoln was unwilling to accept such a condition.[19]

Interestingly enough, this was not the first time that Reynolds had been considered for the command. Charles F. Benjamin, who occupied positions in the Army of the Potomac and the War Department, described the choice of Hooker to replace Burnside in January 1863, as follows:

> . . . the selection was found to lie among Hooker, Reynolds, and Meade. The first-named had a strong popular lead, but General Halleck, backed by the Secretary of War, contended that there were reasons of an imperative character why he should not be intrusted with an independent command of so high a degree of responsibility. . . . President Lincoln apparently yielded to the views of those in charge of the military department of affairs, and thereupon Halleck confidentially inquired of Reynolds if he was prepared to accept the command. Reynolds replied that he expected to obey all lawful orders coming to his hands, but as the communication seemed to imply the possession of an option in himself, he deemed it his duty to say frankly that he could not accept the command in a voluntary sense, unless a liberty of action should be granted to him considerably beyond any which he had reason to expect. He was thereupon dropped, and the choice further and finally restricted to Hooker and Meade. . . .[20]

So Reynolds returned from Washington in June 1863 to an altered destiny. He was forty-two years old and had been in his country's service for nearly twenty-six years. He had proven himself to his troops by his careful management of details, always with the intent of easing their burdens. All this was accomplished with a minimum of small talk:

> He would sometimes ride for miles without speaking a word to any of the officers around him . . . yet he had a social side to his stern nature, for his brother officers in the old army spoke of his courteous ways and of his charming personality, and officers who were in his brigade say that, during the Peninsular campaign and at other times, he, as brigade commander, would draw from them, by his friendly and interested manner, a valuable amount of information, at the same time proffering advice about their own duties, for which they were most thankful.[21]

13. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, p. 102.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 116; John J. Hennessy, *Return to Bull Run—The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1993), pp. 408-22. "Reynolds grabbed the splintered flagstaff of the 6th Pennsylvania Reserves and rode the length of his line waving it over his head. . . . ," p. 419.
15. See Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, pp. 123-39 for an amusing account of Reynolds' strenuous efforts to get efficient service from the militia, and of the even greater exertions by the militia to resist such efforts.
16. *Ibid.*, Appendix, pp. 220-23.
17. Wainwright, *Diary of Battle*, p. 229.
18. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, pp. 103, 104.
19. Glenn Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1958), p.73.
20. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1884-1888; reprint, New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), 3:239. Benjamin's account of an "elaborately orchestrated change of command" is challenged. See Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), p. 516, n. 22.
21. Pennsylvania Gettysburg Battlefield Commission, *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg: Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments Erected*

The gathering and putting to proper use of information is a key element in the success of any army. We will quote from numerous messages that passed between various commanders to show how such intelligence was collected and used. This approach will reveal the extent of General Reynolds' knowledge when he decided to contest the Confederate advance towards Gettysburg. To minimize confusion, each message will be assigned a number.

Miller, *Photographic History*, 1911
Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield

Cavalry was the chief source of intelligence to the Civil War army commander. If used properly, the horse soldiers would be constantly on the move, scouting, probing, attacking, and screening, always attempting to fulfill their difficult dual role of obtaining information on the opponent's strength and dispositions, while at the same time striving to keep the opposing cavalry from doing the same.

"Whoever saw a dead cavalryman?" was one of the favorite jibes of the Federal and Confederate foot soldiers. This denigration of one of the army's major components was understandable, considering the lackluster record the Union cavalry had compiled against their Confederate counterparts. But the tide was beginning to turn, and it gained powerful momentum at the beginning of the Gettysburg campaign when, on June 9 at Brandy Station, the eastern Federal horsemen held their own in the war's biggest cavalry engagement.[22] A major contributor to the rise of the Blue cavalry was Maj. Gen. John Buford, commander of the First Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac. "Few bolder or more enterprising soldiers ever rode at the head of a column of horse than this gallant Kentuckian. Buford was . . . tireless in his search for information and always eager to fight."[23]

Civilians also played a vital intelligence-gathering role during the Gettysburg campaign, as can be seen from this afternoon dispatch of June 26 to General Reynolds from Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, commander of the Eleventh Corps:

MESSAGE 1

> I learn through different sources that there is no enemy at Crampton's Pass. . . . Fifteen of my headquarters cavalry dashed into Boonsborough, and went about a half mile beyond, chasing out a squad of rebel cavalry. The inhabitants there report that Longstreet encamped between Keedysville and Sharpsburg last night, and moved this morning toward Hagerstown. He had forded the river at Shepherdstown. Ewell, with Jackson's old corps, passed through Boonsborough on Tuesday. Yesterday and day before a part of A. P. Hill's corps passed through; [Ambrose R.] Wright's brigade of that corps yesterday forenoon, with seventeen pieces of artillery; his force 5,400 (a Union man's count)....These regiments were about 400 or 500 strong. The whole force which passed through Boonsborough, about 20,000. Lee in person crossed the Potomac last night. His entire force on this side up to yesterday reported to be between 60,000 and 70,000 men. . . .[24]

The information contained in this communication was extraordinarily accurate, the only serious error involving the count of Wright's brigade. Busey and Martin, the authoritative modern source on numbers at Gettysburg, place Wright's June 30 strength at 1,500 and the average strength of his three regiments, excluding a small Georgia battalion, at 437. The artillery unit observed may well have been Maj. John Lane's Sumter Artillery, attached to Maj. Gen. Richard Anderson's division of Hill's corps, which mustered three companies manning seventeen guns. Busey and Martin estimate Lee's engaged strength at 70,136.[25]

By Sunday morning, June 28, the three corps constituting Reynolds' command were gathered at Middletown, Maryland, about eight miles west of Frederick. Buford's cavalry division was at Jefferson, six miles south of Middletown. During the day, the First and Eleventh Corps would move east to Frederick, while the Third Corps would march north about ten miles to

by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to Mark the Positions of the Pennsylvania Commands Engaged in the Battle, ed. John P. Nicholson, 3 vols. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Wm. Stanley Ray, State Printer, 1914), 2:1093.

22. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, pp. 56-64.
23. Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General*, 5 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 1:264.
24. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, p. 336.
25. John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown New Jersey: Longstreet House, 1986), pp. 129, 190, 191. This book is an indispensable reference to anyone interested in the Gettysburg campaign.

Woodsboro. Buford's troopers replaced the infantry at Middletown. This was also the day that Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Reynolds' leadership of the left wing was continued by Meade's order of June 30:

MESSAGE 2

Major-General Reynolds, Taneytown, will, upon receipt of this order, assume command of the three corps forming the left wing in the present position of the army, viz, the First Corps, Eleventh Corps, and Third Corps. He will make such dispositions and give such orders as circumstances may require, and report from time to time to the commanding general.[26]

On the afternoon of June 28, Meade sent a dispatch to General Halleck in Washington which showed, among other things, how difficult it was for an army to keep many secrets as it marched through enemy country:

MESSAGE 3

Thomas McCammon, blacksmith, a good man, from Hagerstown, left there on horseback at 11 a.m. to-day. Rebel cavalry came first a week ago last Monday . . . and the first infantry came yesterday a week ago—General Ewell's men. He came personally last Saturday, and was at the Catholic church Sunday, with General Rodes and two other generals. On Monday he left in the direction of Greencastle, in the afternoon, Rodes having left the same morning. Rebel troops have passed every day, more or less, since; some days only three or four regiments or a brigade, and some days, yesterday, for instance, all of Longstreet's command passed through excepting two brigades. Saw Longstreet yesterday. He and Lee had their headquarters at Mr. [James H.] Grove's, just beyond town limits, toward Greencastle, last night, and left there this a.m. at 8 o'clock. Think A. P. Hill went through last Tuesday.... Mr. [William] Logan, register of wills, and Mr. [William H.] Protzman, very fine men in Hagerstown, have taken pains to count the rebels, and could not make them over 80,000. They counted the artillery; made it two hundred and seventy-five guns. . . ."[27]

On Monday afternoon, June 29, as Reynolds' First and Eleventh Corps moved toward Emmitsburg from Frederick, the following message was sent by Reynolds to Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, Meade's chief-of-staff:

MESSAGE 4

. . . [Edward] Hopkins, a scout of [Col. George H.] Sharpe's, has just returned from Gettysburg, with a statement of affairs in that quarter yesterday, Early's division passed there in the direction of York, and the other division (Gordon's, I think), with the trains, was in the Valley, and moved along a road nearer the mountains. Another division (Rodes') of Ewell's was up by Carlisle, and Hill (A. P.) was said to be moving up through Greencastle, in the direction of Chambersburg. . . .[28]

At 11:30 on Tuesday morning, June 30, Meade sent this dispatch to Reynolds:

MESSAGE 5

Your dispatch is received. The enemy undoubtedly occupy the Cumberland Valley, from Chambersburg, in force; whether the holding of the Cashtown Gap is to prevent our entrance, or is their advance against us, remains to be seen. With Buford at Gettysburg and Mechanicstown [Thurmont], and a regiment in front of Emmitsburg, you ought to be advised in time of their approach.

In case of an advance in force either against you, or Howard at Emmitsburg you must fall back to that place, and I will re-enforce you from the corps nearest to you. . . .

You are advised of the general position of the army. We are as concentrated as my present information of the position of the enemy justifies. I have pushed out the cavalry in all directions to feel for them, and so soon as I can make up any positive opinion as to their position, I will move again. In the meantime, if they advance against me, I must concentrate at that point where they show the strongest force. . . .

P. S.—If, after occupying your present position, it is your judgment that you would be in better position at Emmitsburg than where you are, you can fall back without waiting for the enemy or further orders. Your present position was given more with a view to an advance on Gettysburg, than a defensive point.[29]

Reynolds established his headquarters on Tuesday night, June 30, about five miles south of Gettysburg on Marsh Creek. At Reynolds' request, General Howard, Eleventh Corps commander, rode up from Emmitsburg toward sunset. They spent several hours together, studying maps and discussing the reports and dispatches.[30] Reynolds was concerned because he had heard nothing from Buford, who was closest to the advancing Confederates. Sometime after 10 p.m., Reynolds sent to army headquarters at Taneytown the following message:

26. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, pp. 414, 415.
27. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, p. 65.
28. *Ibid.*, pt. 3, p. 397.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 419, 420.
30. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, p. 195.

MESSAGE 6

I have forwarded all the information to you that I have been able to gain to-day. I think if the enemy advances in force from Gettysburg, and we are to fight a defensive battle in this vicinity, that the position to be occupied is just north of the town of Emmitsburg, covering the Plank road to Taneytown. He will undoubtedly endeavor to turn our left by way of Fairfield and the mountain roads leading down into the Frederick and Emmitsburg pike, near Mount Saint Mary's College.

The above is mere surmise on my part. At all events, an engineer officer ought to be sent up to reconnoiter this position, as we have reason to believe that the main force of the enemy is in the vicinity of Cashtown, or debouching from the Cumberland Valley above it.[31]

Cavalry corps headquarters, on June 29, issued orders that two brigades and a battery from Buford's division should move to Gettysburg "... by tomorrow night. ..."[32] After bivouacking on Monday night, June 29, near Fairfield, Pennsylvania, about six miles northwest of Emmitsburg, Buford set out for Gettysburg the next morning. His division consisted of three brigades, but the reserve brigade of Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt was detached with orders to move to Mechanicstown to protect the rear of the left wing and bring up stragglers.[33] The remaining two brigades, each of four regiments, were commanded by Cols. William Gamble and Thomas Devin. The combined strength of these brigades, as they rode north that morning toward a community that few of the men had probably heard of, was about 2,950.[34]

While evidence as to the exact time is conflicting, it appears that Buford's long line of horse soldiers trotted into Gettysburg sometime after 11:00 a.m.[35] The Confederate infantry brigade of Brig. Gen. J. Johnston Pettigrew, which had advanced toward the town that morning from the vicinity of Cashtown, drew back without interference from the cavalry. Buford spent the rest of the day studying the terrain and selecting positions for his men. We cannot be certain of what went through Buford's mind on this occasion. His report does not go into his mental processes, and his death less than six months later, without further expressing himself on the subject, forces us to speculate as to his reasoning.[36] A recent Buford biographer has perhaps explained Buford's thinking:

> Slowly, almost imperceptively, Buford began to develop a plan in which topography [was to play] a major role. The land west of town—from which direction he expected the initial, and perhaps the heaviest opposition to come—rolled to the mountains in a series of ridges. Some of these were fringed by woods and skirted by streams and each was capable of serving as a defensive position.... By early evening, armed with reliable reports of enemy movements in the vicinity, Buford appears to have convinced himself that he could pull off something never achieved in this war: a defense in depth by dismounted cavalry against a large force of foot soldiers with full artillery support.[37]

Miller, *Photographic History*, 1911

Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

31. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, pp. 417, 418.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 400
33. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, pp. 144, 926, 943; *ibid.*, pt. 3, p. 400.
34. Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths*, p. 99. The 17th Pennsylvania Cavalry of Devin's brigade had been recruited from ten counties, several of them in the general vicinity of Gettysburg, so the town may have been familiar to some of these men. See Edmund G. Raus, Jr., *A Generation on the March—The Union Army at Gettysburg* (Lynchburg, Virginia: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1987), p. 146.
35. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 232.
36. Buford's report is in *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, pp. 926-30. See sketch of Buford in Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp. 52, 53.
37. Edward G. Longacre, *General John Buford—A Military Biography* (Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Combined Books, 1995), pp. 184, 185. See also Matthew Forney Steele, *American Campaigns* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Infantry Association, 1935), p. 364; Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Crisis at the Crossroads—The First Day at Gettysburg* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 17; Dr. Walter Kempster, "The Cavalry at Gettysburg," *War Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Wisconsin, MOLLUS*, 4 vols. (Mil-

As darkness descended, tensions rose. Buford's report stated:

> . . . The night of the 30th was a busy night for the division. No reliable information of value could be obtained from the inhabitants, and but for the untiring exertions of many different scouting parties, information of the enemy's whereabouts and movements could not have been gained in time to prevent him from getting the town before our army could get up."[38]

At 10:30 p.m., Buford sent the following dispatch to General Reynolds:

> MESSAGE 7
>
> . . . I am satisfied that A. P. Hill's corps is massed just back of Cashtown, about 9 miles from this place. Pender's division of this [Hill's] corps came up today. . . .The enemy's pickets (infantry and artillery) are within 4 miles of this place, on the Cashtown road. My parties have returned that went north, northwest, and northeast, after crossing the road from Cashtown to Oxford in several places. They heard nothing of any force having passed over it lately. . . . Near Heidlersburg today, one of my parties captured a courier of Lee's. . . . He says Ewell's corps is crossing the mountains from Carlisle, Rodes' division being at Petersburg in advance. Longstreet, from all I can learn, is still behind Hill. I have many rumors and reports of the enemy advancing upon me from toward York. . . .[39]

Something, perhaps Buford's soldierly instincts, told him that dawn would bring trouble. As he discussed the situation with Colonel Devin late that night, the latter stated confidently that he could handle anything that came his way in the next twenty-four hours. "No you won't," Buford snapped. "They will attack you in the morning, and they will come 'booming'—skirmishers three deep. You will have to fight like the devil to hold your own until supports arrive. The enemy must know the importance of this position, and will strain every nerve to secure it, and if we are able to hold it we will do well."[40] Military history can be searched in vain for a more remarkably accurate prediction.

At 5:00 a.m. on Wednesday, July 1, Confederate infantry of Brig. Gen. Henry Heth's division began moving southeast down the Chambersburg Pike (referred to in Buford's message of the night before as the Cashtown road) toward Gettysburg. Federal vedettes, eyes straining, saw "a cloud of dust . . . rising above the trees" in the misty distance, and alerted Gamble's main body on McPherson's Ridge. "As bugle calls echoed along McPherson's Ridge, men selected as skirmishers launched out from the main body to the pre-determined positions along Herr's Ridge and Belmont School House Ridge, a little more than three-quarters of a mile west of the main body's campsites on McPherson's Ridge."[41] Heth's strength was close to 7,500.[42] The Federal cavalry, fighting dismounted, put up a spirited defense, firing from behind fences and trees, slowing the Confederates' advance.[43] The horse soldiers' numbers were reduced because one man in four acted as a horseholder, but the men on the line poured out a substantial volume of fire, though they were outranged by the Rebels' muzzle-loading rifle-muskets. Contrary to numerous commentators who have stated otherwise, none of Buford's men were armed with the Spencer repeating carbine, and few if any carried the Spencer rifle.[44] Instead, the Federals were equipped, for the most part, with the Sharps carbine. This was a good weapon with which, even though it was a single shot breechloader, a skillful cavalryman could fire two to three times faster than his Confederate opponent.[45] But Rebel pressure proved too great, and Gamble's main line pulled back about one-half mile to McPherson's Ridge.

John Reynolds was awakened at 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, July 1, with orders from Meade to move north to Gettysburg:

---

waukee, 1891-1914), 4:397. Kempster, a lieutenant in the 10th New York of J. Irvin Gregg's cavalry brigade, alleges that Buford had orders from cavalry corps commander Alfred Pleasonton "to hold Gettysburg at all hazards until supports arrive" (p. 399). In addition, Kempster does his best to advance the theory that Pleasonton knew all Lee's plans, and that ". . . Buford's cavalry arrived in Gettysburg in accordance with a matured plan. . . . and that "the collision was not accidental. . . ." etc. Coddington says it best: "The theory of the inevitability of a battle at Gettysburg is challenged by a contrary tradition which has become an axiom: that the engagement was an accident . . . this interpretation . . . comes close to the truth for there is no convincing evidence that any commanding officer of either side sat down before a map, pointed to Gettysburg, and said, 'Here is where we shall fight. We must plan accordingly.' On the other hand, by the night of June 30 both Lee and Meade, judging by what each knew about the other and the disposition of his forces, must have suspected that an early clash of arms in the vicinity of Gettysburg was very possible. Each commander was still feeling his way, however, and neither had as yet decided just where or how he would try to meet his foe," (pp. 260, 261).

38. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, p. 927.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 923, 924.
40. William F. Fox, *New York at Gettysburg*, 3 vols. (Albany: J. B. Lyon, Co., 1900), 1:9.
41. Gary Kross, "Fight Like the Devil to Hold Your Own-General John Buford's Cavalry at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863," *Blue and Gray Magazine* (February 1995): 9. This is an extrordinarily informative article which deals in part with the placement of Buford's cavalry on the night of June 30.
42. Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths*, p. 173.
43. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 266; Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, p. 31.
44. Stephen Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 1:438; Edward J. Stackpole, *They Met at Gettysburg* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Eagle Books, 1956), pp. 121, 122; Edward G. Longacre, *7th Cavalry at Gettysburg* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 60. *See* Richard S. Shue, *Morning at Willoughby Run* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 1995), pp. 213, 214, for an excellent discussion which totally demolishes the myth that large numbers of Buford's troopers were armed with Spencer repeating carbines on July 1.
45. Earl J. Coates and Dean S. Thomas, *An Introduction to Civil War Small Arms* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 1990), pp. 45, 83; see also Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths*, pp. 205, 206.

MESSAGE 8

Third Corps to Emmitsburg; Second Corps to Taneytown; Fifth Corps to Hanover; Twelfth Corps toTwoTaverns; First Corps to Gettysburg; Eleventh Corps to Gettysburg (or supporting distance); Sixth Corps to Manchester. . . . The commanding general desires you to be informed that, from present information, Longstreet and Lee are at Chambersburg, partly toward Gettysburg, Ewell at Carlisle and York. Movements indicate a disposition to advance from Chambersburg to Gettysburg.

. . . The general believes he has relieved Harrisburg and Philadelphia, and now desires to look to his own army, and assume position for offensive or defensive, as occasion requires, or rest to the troops.[46]

Miller, *Photographic History*, 1911
General in Chief Henry W. Halleck

General Doubleday's report outlines the sequence of events:

> On the eventful morning of July 1, between 7 and 8 o'clock, General Reynolds sent for me for the purpose of explaining the telegrams received by him in relation to the movements of the rebels and the latest position of our own troops. This information showed that the enemy was reported in force at Cashtown and Mummasburg, and that our cavalry was skirmishing with them on the roads leading from Gettysburg to those places. He told me he had already given orders to Wadsworth's division, with Hall's battery, to move forward, and that he would accompany these troops in person, while I remained to bring up the balance of the corps. Owing to the intervals between the divisions and the necessity of calling in the pickets, from an hour and a half to two hours elapsed before the remaining troops were en route. Wadsworth's division was, therefore, obliged to sustain the brunt of the action alone for this length of time. As soon as I saw that Robinson's and Rowley's divisions, with the remaining batteries, had commenced the march, I rode on in advance of the column.[47]

Despite Buford's message of the night before, alluding to the enemy's proximity to the town, there is some evidence that Reynolds did not anticipate fighting on July 1. His artillery commander, Colonel Wainwright, recalled: ". . . I rode on ahead to learn what I could as to the prospects of a fight. I saw General Reynolds, who said that he did not expect any; that we were only moving up so as to be within supporting distance to Buford, who was to push out farther. . . ."[48]

Reynolds, having conferred with General Doubleday, was in the saddle by 8:00 a.m., riding north to Gettysburg. He was about two miles south of town when he received a message from Buford telling of the Confederate advance. He sent word to Brig. Gen. James Wadsworth's division to close up, and then one of the best horseman in the Army of the Potomac rode rapidly ahead, on his final journey.[49]

Three questions should be addressed in attempting to determine whether Reynolds' decision to give battle was justified. First, what were Meade's orders to Reynolds? Second, what did Reynolds know of the strengths and positions of the approaching Federal and Confederate formations? And third, did the terrain on which Reynolds chose to fight lend itself to a successful defense?

Before assessing Meade's orders, however, an examination of the instructions under which General Meade himself was operating would be useful, since those directives would obviously influence subsequent orders issued to Reynolds. The order placing Meade in command was accompanied by a message from General Halleck stating in part:

MESSAGE 9

You will not be hampered by any minute instructions from these headquarters. Your army is free to act as you may deem proper under the circumstances as they arise. You will, however, keep in view the important fact that the Army of the Potomac is the covering army of Washington as

46. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, p. 416.
47. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, p. 244.
48. Wainwright, *Diary of Battle*, p. 233.
49. It was said that Reynolds could snatch a dime from the ground at a full gallop. *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg*, 2:1097.

well as the army of operation against the invading forces of the rebels. You will, therefore, maneuver and fight in such a manner as to cover the capital and also Baltimore, as far as circumstances will admit. Should General Lee move upon either of these places, it is expected that you will either anticipate him or arrive with him so as to give him battle. . . .[50]

This message created problems for the new commander. To require the army to cover Baltimore and Washington implied that it should assume a defensive posture, while to label it the army of operations against the Rebels clearly indicated that an offensive role be pursued. The city of Washington, by the summer of 1863, was one of the heaviest fortified areas in the world. But the administration was obsessive in its concern for the capital's safety, with good reason, for there is little doubt that its capture by the Confederates, even for a short time, would have been a devastating blow to the Union. The protection of Washington clearly had major military and political implications. Lincoln's belief that the capital had been left insufficiently secure at the beginning of the Peninsula Campaign in 1862 led the president to withhold an entire corps from Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan which, as stated by his biographer, ". . . became the cornerstone of the case [McClellan] built to convince history . . . that a treasonous conspiracy was the cause of all his troubles on the Peninsula."[51]

While the defenses of Washington were formidable, appearances were, to an extent, deceiving. "If the . . . defenses had been properly manned it might have been . . . good strategy to catch the enemy between them and the Union army, but in the Gettysburg campaign with total manpower in the East at its lowest ebb, Halleck had reduced the Washington garrison below the limits of safety in order to bolster the diminished ranks of the Army of the Potomac. An attempt therefore to get Lee's army between a hammer and an anvil was not possible."[52]

The situation facing Meade when he succeeded Hooker on June 28 was fluid. The Confederates were off somewhere to the north, east, and west, plundering Pennsylvania, while the Army of the Potomac was scattered over southern Maryland from Middletown to Poolesville. Although, as we have seen, Halleck's order placing Meade in command was ambiguous on the matter of defensive or offensive operations, from a political standpoint Meade had no choice but to move north and seek out Lee. His first message to Halleck as commander of the army shows that he recognized this fact:

MESSAGE 10

The order placing me in command of this army is received. . . . Totally unexpected as it has been, and in ignorance of the exact condition of the troops and position of the enemy, I can only now say that it appears to me I must move toward the Susquehanna, keeping Washington and Baltimore well covered, and if the enemy is checked in his attempt to cross the Susquehanna, or if he turns toward Baltimore, to give him battle. . . .[53]

The possibility that the Confederates might try to flank Meade on either his right or left was a serious concern, and it shows in the following message to his cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasanton, dated June 30:

MESSAGE 11

The major-general commanding directs me to say that it is of the utmost importance to him that he receives reliable information of the presence of the enemy, his forces, and his movements. His projected movement is toward the line of the Baltimore and Harrisburg road. His instructions require him to cover Baltimore and Washington, while his objective point is the army under Lee. To be able to find if this army is divided, and to concentrate upon any detached portion of it, without departing from the instructions which govern him, would be a great object. People in the country are so frightened that he must depend solely upon the cavalry for all the information he can gain. He looks to you to keep him informed of their movements, and especially that no force concentrates on his right, in the vicinity of York, to get between him and the Susquehanna, and also that no force moves on his left toward Hagerstown and the passes below Cashtown. Your cavalry force is large, and must be vigilant and active. The reports must be those gained by the cavalry themselves, and information sent in should be reliable.

The duty you have to perform is of a most important and sacred character. Cavalry battles must be secondary to this object. . . .[54]

Let us now review and analyze Meade's orders to Reynolds. Message 2 continued Reynolds' command of the left wing, giving him the authority ". . . to make such dispositions and give such orders as circumstances may require." The unlimited discretion contained therein was almost mandatory considering the situation. As the two armies groped toward one another it was crucial that the commander of the leading Federal elements be given every possible latitude to react as he thought best once contact with the enemy was established. Thus it would have been a mistake, under these circumstances, to burden Reynolds with detailed orders setting forth various actions

50. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, p. 61.
51. Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), pp. 175, 176.
52. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 216.
53. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, pp. 61, 62.
54. *Ibid.*, pt. 3, p. 421.

he should take depending on this or that set of contingencies. Meade could not cover every possibility.

The second paragraph of Message 5 states, "In case of an advance *in force* [emphasis added] either against you or Howard at Emmitsburg, you must fall back to that place. . . ." The last sentence of paragraph three reads: ". . . if they advance against me, I must *concentrate* at that point where they show the *strongest force*. . . ." [emphasis added] The question becomes, under Message 5, how should Reynolds respond should the Confederates advance in force upon Emmitsburg, or upon his First Corps? The second paragraph requires a retrograde movement to Emmitsburg, while paragraph three states that the army must concentrate where the enemy shows the strongest force. Perhaps this was Meade's method of continuing to give Reynolds the discretion inherent in Message 2. The postscript to Message 5 does nothing to limit that discretion, giving Reynolds authority to fall back to Emmitsburg more or less as he pleases.

Reynolds' Message 6 was undoubtedly sent after his receipt of Message 5. He obviously feels under no compulsion to fight at Gettysburg, as his second sentence, stating ". . . if the enemy advances in force from Gettysburg, and we are to fight a defensive battle in this vicinity, . . . the position to be occupied is just north of . . . Emmitsburg," practically reiterates the language of the second paragraph in Meade's Message 5. Thus, it seems clear that Meade's orders to Reynolds did not, in any way, require him to fight at Gettysburg, and that Reynolds, in his Message 6, showed that he was well aware of his discretion in the matter.

Meade's last message to Reynolds, dated July 1, like the Pipe Creek Circular, which we will discuss shortly, was probably never seen by its intended recipient. We quote from it to show how heavily Meade was depending on Reynolds:

> MESSAGE 12
>
> . . . The telegraphic intelligence received . . . with the various movements reported from Buford, seem to indicate the concentration of the enemy either at Chambersburg or at a point situated somewhere on a line drawn between Chambersburg and York, through Mummasburg and to the north of Gettysburg.
>
> The commanding general cannot decide whether it is his best policy to move to attack until he learns something more definite of the point at which the enemy is concentrating. This he hopes to do during the day. Meanwhile, he would like to have your views upon the subject, at least so far as concerns your position. If the enemy is concentrating to our right of Gettysburg, that point would not at first glance seem to be a proper strategic point of concentration for this army.
>
> If the enemy is concentrating in front of Gettysburg or to the left of it, the general is not sufficiently well informed of the nature of the country to judge of its character for either an offensive or defensive position. . . .
>
> The general having just assumed command, in obedience to orders, with the position of affairs leaving no time to learn the condition of the army as to morale and proportionate strength compared with its last return, would gladly receive from you any suggestions as to the points laid down in this note. He feels that you know more of the condition of the troops in your vicinity and the country than he does. . . . You have all the information which the general has received, and the general would like to have your views. . . .[55]

Historian Coddington discusses this message as follows:

> Thus (Meade) left the question of a general engagement at Gettysburg to the able and aggressive Reynolds. In this message Meade resolved the contradictions between the order for a general advance and the instructions for withdrawal contained in the Pipe Creek Circular. When studied in reference to each other the three papers demonstrate Meade's willingness to fight Lee at any time and any place as long as it was to his advantage to do so.[56]

The second question involves the strengths and locations of the antagonists. What did Reynolds know of unit numbers, both his own and Confederate, that were so close to collision? This is not easy to answer. Historians have argued over these matters since the Rebels faded back to Seminary Ridge after the repulse of the Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble Charge.[57] But post-battle figures do not concern us here, our inquiry being directed only to what Reynolds knew on the morning of July 1.

As the two armies converged on Gettysburg, numbers would assume critical importance. This was not to be a set-piece battle like Fredericksburg. Instead Gettysburg has come down to us as one of history's classic "meeting engagements," defined as an "unexpected collision between opposing forces that takes place before either can execute a planned attack or defense."[58] If it were necessary to hold the town for army concentration purposes, or if the surrounding terrain should offer good defensive possibilities, the Federal commander deciding to stay there would need sufficient strength to hang on until other elements of the Army of the Potomac could reach the field.

Beginning with the Confederates, recall Message 1, sent to Reynolds by General Howard on June 26. This dispatch estimated Lee's army to number between sixty thousand and seventy thousand men. It was common knowledge that the Army

55. *Ibid.*, p. 460.
56. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 240.
57. Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths*, pp. 3, 118.
58. Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1959), p. 542.

of Northern Virginia had been reorganized, after Stonewall Jackson's death, into three corps of three divisions each. Dividing the high estimate of seventy thousand by three would indicate the average strength of a Confederate corps to be around twenty-three thousand. Buford's Message 7 stated that Hill's corps was at Cashtown, only eight miles from Gettysburg, and that Longstreet's corps was behind Hill (not giving any distances).

According to Coddington:

> Once an army began active campaigning it became almost impossible to know its numerical strength. During these periods of marching, countermarching, halting, and fighting, the old routine of camp disappeared, many extra new duties came into being, and the "curse of straggling" set in, some of it necessary but much of it willful. Under these circumstances the regimental morning reports were apt to be slurred over or suspended, even if they were made according to regulations they were liable to be untrustworthy as to the number of men who could be placed in line of battle. . . . For these reasons there is no way of knowing the exact strength of the two armies on the eve of the battle.[59]

It would seem that the farther an officer moved up the chain of command the less likely he would know, with any degree of certainty, the numbers he commanded. The reports he read might give him an idea, but as Coddington shows, such numbers would rarely be accurate. Abstracts from the returns of the Army of the Potomac appear in the *Official Records*, at ten-day intervals, from June 10 to July 31, 1863.[60] It might be reasonable to assume that Reynolds would not have seen the figures for June 30, just before battle was joined, but that those of June 20 could well have come to his attention. The June 20 abstract shows Reynolds' First Corps to number, including officers, 9,893 present for duty, the Third Corps 12,652, and the Eleventh Corps 10,534, for a left wing grand total of 33,079 infantry.[61]

It would be unjust to allege, for the reasons adduced above by Coddington, that Reynolds should have known his own strength down to the last soldier. But it does not seem unfair to contend, as we will see shortly, that he could well have realized that the number of troops he could bring to the field in the first few hours might not be sufficient to hold back the Rebels he knew *might* be in the vicinity.

What about Reynolds' knowledge of the locations of various units, both Federal and Confederate? Buford's late evening dispatch of June 30 (Message 7) advised that Hill's corps was massed back of Cashtown, which is eight miles from Gettysburg, and that Longstreet was behind Hill. Reynolds' communication to Butterfield on June 29 (Message 4) indicated that Early's division had passed through Gettysburg in the direction of York, and that Rodes' division was near Carlisle. Doubleday's report stated that Reynolds told him on the morning of July 1 that Confederates were said to be in force at Mummasburg, which is only four miles north-northwest of Gettysburg.

The June 30 marching orders for the Union corps, which were furnished to all corps commanders, are set forth in Message 13, dated June 29. It would be from these points that help would have to come if Reynolds ran into trouble that he could not handle on July 1.

MESSAGE 13

> The following is the order of march for to-morrow:
>
> Twelfth Corps to Littlestown, passing the Third Corps.
>
> Fifth Corps, Pipe Creek Crossing, on the road between Littlestown and Westminster.
>
> Sixth Corps, through Westminster to Manchester.
>
> First Corps, half way to Gettysburg, on crossing of Marsh Creek.[62]

Marsh Creek, where Reynolds' First Corps settled down for the night of June 30, is about five miles south-southwest of Gettysburg. Reynolds knew from the marching orders for June 29, which did not mention his Eleventh Corps, that the Eleventh was still at Emmitsburg, approximately ten miles from Gettysburg. The Third Corps, under Reynolds' authority, was at Bridgeport, about five miles southeast of Emmitsburg, and thus fifteen miles from Gettysburg. The Twelfth Corps at Littlestown was about ten miles southeast of town. The Fifth Corps was at Union Mills, seven or so miles southeast of Littlestown, putting it around seventeen miles from Gettysburg. The Sixth Corps at Manchester was twenty-six miles distant. The Second Corps, though not mentioned in the above circular, was at Uniontown, eighteen miles from town.

To move an army the size of Meade's from one given point to another was a major undertaking. As Coddington points out:

> A corps of 11,000 men marching four abreast, closed up and without the wagons and artillery, would make a column from two to three miles long. If the marchers were accompanied by a train conservatively estimated to include 222 team drawn army wagons, some two-horse lighter vehicles, 50 ambulances, and about 26 guns with their limbers and caissons, the column would become five or six times longer, or between ten and eighteen miles. If not properly managed such a large-scale movement by thousands of men and horse-drawn vehicles could easily get into a snarl that would take hours to untangle.[63]

59. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 247.
60. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, pp. 151, 152.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
62. *Ibid.*, pt. 3, p. 402.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

These daily marches were brutal affairs. The roads raised choking clouds of dust, the weather was hot and muggy, and the men sweltered in their heavy uniforms. The average infantryman carried a fifty-seven-pound load, including musket, ammunition, tent, blanket, canteen, and rations.[64] It was standard procedure for an infantry corps to march twenty miles per day under such conditions, at a speed of between two and three miles per hour.[65] Using three miles per hour as our guideline, we can determine the time it would take each Federal corps to reach Gettysburg once a call for help was received. Thus the Eleventh Corps was more than three marching hours away, as was the Twelfth. The Third was almost five hours distant, while the Second and Fifth were nearly six hours out. The Sixth, on the extreme right, was close to nine hours away. Reynolds would have been remiss if he had not done similar calculations before committing his men to battle.

National Archives

Brig. Gen. John Buford

The reason Gettysburg acted like a magnet for the units of both armies is clear from a glance at the map. All roads, seemingly, met there. Lee was striving to bring Ewell's corps back to the main body of his army before Meade came on the scene, while the Federals were advancing toward their foes, dutifully covering Washington and Baltimore, and relying on the road net to permit rapid concentration as soon as the Confederates were found in strength. Meade could hardly have done better in placing his units on the night of June 30 so that they could march to Gettysburg on separate roads, thus avoiding undue congestion. The First Corps was a short distance from town on the Emmitsburg road, the Eleventh and Third could both advance up the same road with a good interval between them, the Twelfth and Fifth could come up the Baltimore Pike, likewise well separated. The Second Corps had an unimpeded march up the Taneytown road, while the Sixth could reach Gettysburg from the east on the Hanover road.

Third, let us examine the terrain question. As Reynolds rode towards Gettysburg, partially retracing the route General Buford had taken less than twenty-four hours before, he would, as a trained soldier, have eyed the ground closely during the few miles he traveled after learning of the Confederate advance.[66] The various topographical features that loomed up through the early morning haze were nameless to him, but they would have entered into his calculations as the town grew closer. He could hear firing ahead beyond his sight, small arms and the occasional growl of artillery. Buford was obviously attempting to hold his position. It was imperative that Reynolds find him quickly so that he could examine the field and decide what to do next.

When Reynolds entered Gettysburg, the buildings obstructed his sight lines. He asked for directions and spurred on. The exact time of his arrival on the field has been debated ever since. It seems that no two watches that went through the battle were set the same.[67] The place where Reynolds conferred with Buford has also engendered controversy. It seems likely that Buford would have been viewing the action from McPherson's Ridge, and that Reynolds would have met him there, rather than one-half mile to the rear at the cupola of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, where many authorities have placed the meeting.[68]

Reynolds could now, for the first time, see the lean warriors in gray and butternut who, up to that moment, had been only shadows, moving beyond the distant mountains, the previously invisible subjects of the numerous messages he had sent and received. He could also see that the Confederates were in sufficient strength to be pushing Buford's horse soldiers back toward town. All of this Reynolds probably absorbed in a moment. Summoning his aide, Capt. Stephen Weld, he dictated his last dispatch to General Meade:

MESSAGE 14

> The enemy is advancing in strong force, and I fear he might get to the heights beyond the town before I can. I will fight him inch by inch, and if driven into the town I will barricade the streets, and hold him back as long as possible.[69]

64. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
65. Paddy Griffith, *Battle in the Civil War* (Nottinghamshire, England: Fieldbooks, 1986), p. 9.
66. Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, p. 36.
67. Tucker, *High Tide*, p. 107, puts Reynolds' arrival at 8:35. Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, p. 37, estimates it at 9:00. Coddington, in a much more detailed examination, sets the time at a little past 10:00. See p. 682, n. 14.
68. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 682, n. 14.
69. Stephen Minot Weld, *War Diaries and Letters of Stephen Minot Weld, 1861-1876* (Boston, 1912), pp. 229, 230.

For eighty-three years Gettysburg had slumbered in peaceful anonymity. Never could it have been imagined, in the wildest of nightmares, that these picturesque ridges, hills, fields, and orchards surrounding the town would one day be witness to the supreme crisis in the death struggle of two nations. But from the moment that Reynolds dictated his final message to Meade, that day and hour were at hand.

The untenable nature of the McPherson's Ridge position must have been obvious to Reynolds. Historian Glenn Tucker, more than three decades ago, wrote: "It was exposed to flank attack by the enterprising enemy known to be approaching. Reynolds' keen military perception would have rejected it for anything more than a holding engagement which he would try to sustain until other Federal corps came up to his relief."[70] Coddington discusses the situation as follows:

> Reynolds had good reason for wanting to hold McPherson's Ridge in spite of certain weaknesses in the position. As long as the enemy came from the west it adequately covered the approaches to the town. . . . The greatest defect of the position was the exposure of its right flank to artillery fire from Oak Hill to the north and attacks from infantry which could use nearby fields of tall wheat as cover for their movements. The railroad cut, which was ten to twenty feet deep, partly offset this weakness because it would prevent a sudden assault on the right flank of a line facing west, but if not watched it could also be used as a hidden passage for a flanking column.[71]

What was Reynolds attempting to accomplish by deciding to engage in this holding action on McPherson's Ridge? Again, from Glenn Tucker:

> . . . it seems clear that Reynolds fought a delaying action west of Gettysburg for no other purpose than to secure Cemetery Ridge as a concentration point for the other Federal columns coming up. Both direct and circumstantial evidence support this view. Reynolds had told Meade his purpose was to save this high ground; such was the implication of his statement that he feared the enemy "will get to the heights beyond the town before I can." He had said he would fight "inch by inch" through the streets. This could mean only that, in his mind, he was falling back all the while to Cemetery Ridge.[72]

With regard to holding actions, it is fair to inquire into the reason the choice was not made to immediately defend the heights south and southeast of town. Cavalry afficionado Marshall Krolick addresses Buford's cavalry fight, but the reasoning applies to Reynolds as well:

> The answer is a combination of basic military science and the factual situation. Buford knew that his fight would be a holding action, something which must never be attempted on the same ground you are trying to preserve. If Buford had taken position on the heights, but had not been strong enough to hold them, they would be lost forever. Thus he had to start well in advance of his chosen destination so that as the pressure against him mounted, he had room to pull back.[73]

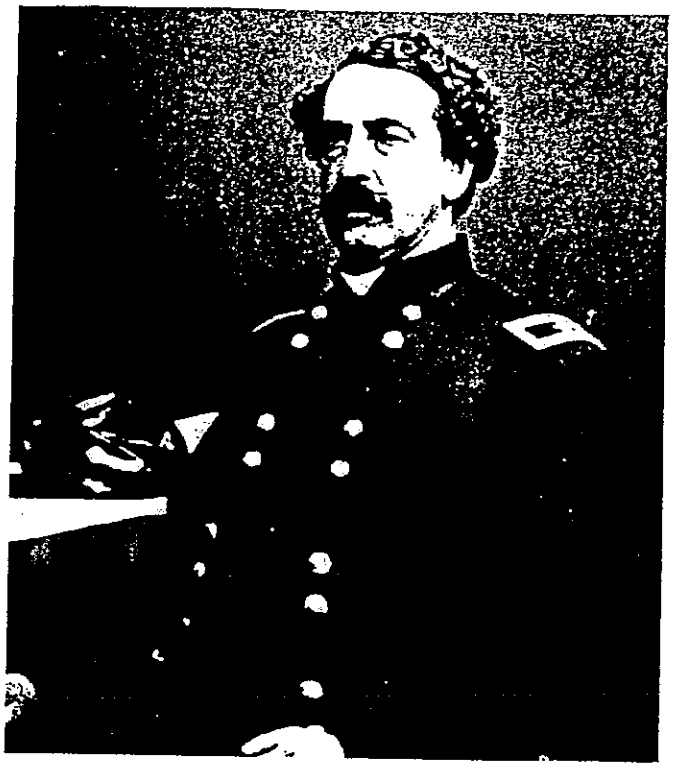
The central question may now, finally, be addressed. Was Reynolds' decision to fight the proper response to what he knew, or was it not? What did Reynolds know? To summarize briefly, he could see that the Confederates were advancing. Buford's cavalrymen were resisting stoutly, but they were giving ground to Rebel infantry, not cavalry, which meant that the enemy in sight were part of Lee's main army. Reynolds must have realized that he needed infantry reinforcements quickly in order to hold the heights and roads coming into town from the south, the possession of which were necessary to facilitate the concentration of his scattered army. James Wadsworth's division, Reynolds knew, was not far down the Emmitsburg Road, but he must also have been aware that the division had only about 3,850 officers and men, and that the following two divisions of his First Corps could not reach the field for some time. He would have remembered, also, that Buford's Message 7 of the previous night indicated that Hill's corps might be as close as Cashtown, only eight miles to the west, and that Longstreet's corps could be just behind Hill's. In addition, General Doubleday, in reporting his discussion with Reynolds before the latter departed for Gettysburg, indicated that the Confederates had been reported in force at both Mummasburg and Cashtown. Mummasburg is only four miles from Gettysburg.

Ewell's corps, Reynolds knew, had been seen moving south from Carlisle, and Reynolds' Message 4 to Butterfield indicated that Early's division had passed through Gettysburg several days previously, heading toward York. Reynolds could have reasonably estimated that a Confederate division would number over seven thousand, and a corps well over twenty thousand. Reynolds' own First and Eleventh Corps totaled about twenty thousand infantry, but it would take, perhaps, more than three hours before all these units could reach the field.

As we have seen, Reynolds had the option to withdraw to Emmitsburg, but the high ground he had observed to the east and south must have appeared to him to offer some good defensive possibilities. It was apparent that Buford's position on McPherson's Ridge could be maintained only against an enemy attacking from the west. To oppose a Confederate advance

70. Tucker, *High Tide*, p. 124.
71. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 267.
72. Tucker, *High Tide*, p. 124.
73. Marshall D. Krolick, "Gettysburg, The First Day, July 1, 1863," *Blue and Gray Magazine* (November 1987): 14.

from the north would require an east-west line exhibiting no favorable topographic features. And if Early's division should make an appearance from the direction of York, any north-facing Federal line would be flanked, while any west-facing line would be taken in reverse.



United States Army Military History Institute
Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday

Recall General Doubleday's report concerning the gap between Wadsworth's division and the other two First Corps divisions when Wadsworth set out for Gettysburg on the morning of July 1. Reynolds could hardly have been unaware of this dispersion of his units. If Confederates in force were then encountered, Wadsworth's 3,850-man division would have to fight unaided for a considerable period before support could be expected. What this could have meant for the Federals, as Wadsworth's division pounded north on the last march scores of its men would ever make, was the possibility of defeat in detail, that is, the piecemeal destruction of Federal units by stronger Confederate formations. It would be Lee's dream come true, the attainment of his objective, voiced to General Trimble only four days earlier: "I shall throw an overwhelming force on their advance, crush it, follow up the success, drive one corps back on another, and by successive repulses and surprises before they can concentrate; create a panic and virtually destroy the army." Lee's previously-quoted words seem eerily prophetic when the movements of the Army of the Potomac are examined after Meade assumed command. The army *had* made forced marches northward, it *had* attempted to interpose between the Confederates and Washington, and it *was* strung out when Reynolds made contact. As we have seen, it was more by accident than by design that various elements of the Army of Northern Virginia were converging on Gettysburg from several directions just as the first Union infantry units were making their appearance. But it would be irrelevant whether these outnumbered Federals were destroyed by Confederates who happened upon the scene by chance. The result would be the same, defeat in detail, just as Lee had foreseen.

For Reynolds to thrust his leading troops into this situation would seem to have been extremely imprudent, in that it entailed the risk of more than twenty thousand men of the First and Eleventh Corps for gains that he would be hard-pressed to justify, considering the possibility of piecemeal defeat. It was true that Buford had called for assistance. But this alone would not have required commitment of the entire Federal army, or even of its leading elements, until the developing situation could be carefully examined, the odds weighed, and a reasonable chance of a favorable outcome foreseen. It may be argued that Reynolds examined the situation and weighed the odds, and that the actions of the next two days proved that his decision was correct. But this is hindsight. He could not have known, when he decided to fight, what would take place on July 2 and 3. Reynolds cannot be faulted for failing to read Lee's mind in regard to his remarks to General Trimble. But may he not be justly criticized for summoning his troops to battle a foe that he knew might be present in sufficient numbers to destroy his units, and thus endanger his entire army?

This is not a universal view. Warren Hassler comments:

> Reynolds' decision to fight west of the town was a momentous one. It also happened to be the correct one. For the Federals to have fallen back in the morning to the heights just south of Gettysburg would have been disastrous, in all probability. The Confederate forces, numerically superior to the Union forces present, and being augmented faster than the Northern troops, would have had the better part of the day to drive the Federals from the Cemetery heights, which would then have been occupied by the Southerners. In this position, the better-concentrated Army of Northern Virginia would be at the apex of the three roads to the south of town upon which the more widely-scattered National army was approaching Gettysburg. Additional hours of daylight would have been available for the Confederates, and defeat in detail of the Federal forces would have been quite likely. Probably the entire result of the battle and campaign would have been different. Hence, it can be seen that Reynolds' decision to sacrifice, if necessary, his First Corps, and even the Eleventh, while taking as heavy a toll of Lee's soldiers as possible, was the wise and soldierly move to make.[74]

74. Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, p. 38.

Hassler seems to be saying that defeat in detail was avoided when Reynolds decided to fight west of town. But there was a strong likelihood, based on the numbers, and also considering the inherent weakness of the west-facing line initially occupied by the Federals, that these positions might not be maintainable against strong Confederate units that were known to be west, north and east of Gettysburg. If the Rebels succeeded in driving the Yankees back through the town, which they ultimately did, there was no certainty that the heights could be held by the defeated Federals, or that reinforcements from other Union corps could arrive in time to save the position. And it would hardly seem "wise and soldierly" to sacrifice two corps for the purpose of inflicting casualties on the enemy. Hassler intimates that failing to save the heights and to control the Gettysburg road net could have "changed the entire result of the battle and campaign." This would be true only if it is assumed that the battle had to be fought to preserve those heights and control those roads. This, in turn, assumes that the Army of the Potomac had to be concentrated at Gettysburg, which could not be done if the heights and roads were lost. But the army did not have to concentrate at Gettysburg: it was free to chose a defensive position elsewhere and let Lee come to it. The Army of Northern Virginia could not continue its eastward advance with the Army of the Potomac lurking on its flank, and it could not remain in any given position for more than a few days because the army would strip the surrounding country of supplies and would have to move again in order to eat. Hassler speaks of defeat in detail. This was a distinct possibility, given the facts as Reynolds knew them. How could this be averted? The best way would have been to halt the army's advance and withdraw its leading elements.

Withdraw to where? As we have seen, the postscript to Message 5 from Meade to Reynolds gave the latter authority to fall back to Emmitsburg if that seemed to be a better position. If Reynolds had ordered such a withdrawal, Meade might well have set in motion the movements called for in the Pipe Creek Circular issued on July 1.[75] The authorities are nearly unanimous in the opinion that Reynolds never saw the circular, so it could have had no influence on his decision to give battle.[76] The circular contemplated a withdrawal by the Army of the Potomac to prepared defensive positions in Maryland, which would have constituted a surrender of the initiative to Lee. But the circular was never implemented, principally by reason of the Federal rush to Gettysburg after the initial clash. Meade was severely criticized after the battle for contemplating such a withdrawal. His enemies, including his former chief-of-staff, General Butterfield, later claimed that the circular showed that Meade was afraid to fight. The second paragraph of the circular stated:

> If the enemy assumes the offensive, and attack, it is his [Meade's] intention, . . . to withdraw the army from its present position, and form line of battle with the left resting in the neighborhood of Middleburg, and the right at Manchester, the general direction being that of Pipe Creek. For this purpose, General Reynolds, in command of the left, will withdraw the force at present at Gettysburg, two corps by the road to Taneytown and Westminster, and, after crossing Pipe Creek, deploy toward Middleburg. The corps at Emmitsburg will be withdrawn, via Mechanicsville, to Middleburg. . . ."[77]

Coddington speaks of the Pipe Creek position:

> The line Meade selected had many advantages. Between fifteen and twenty miles by road south and southeast of Gettysburg, it stretched some twenty miles from Manchester to Middleburg south of Pipe Creek. . . . Although [the creek] would not have been a formidable barrier, the important geological feature of the area with real military significance was Parr Ridge, extending northeast and southwest through Westminster at elevations of 800 to 1,000 feet and widths of four to ten miles. Entrenched on this high ground, the army would have positions almost impossible to storm in frontal attacks or to turn, so that it could effectively cover the approaches to Baltimore and Washington.[78]

A Federal retrograde movement at this stage, whether or not ordered by Reynolds, would have created its own unique set of risks. A strong rear guard action might have been necessary to hold back the Confederates, which possibly would have required the sacrifice of Buford's cavalry and perhaps Wadsworth's division as well. In addition, the question of morale would have had to be considered. The Army of the Potomac, in the previous six months, had been badly beaten at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Ordering the army to retire to defensive positions immediately following its initial contact with the enemy could have been demoralizing to the men. And was it realistic to assume that Lee would follow Meade and attack his entrenched army behind Pipe Creek? What if Lee were to decline the invitation to attack, gather together his loot, and return to Virginia? The effect on the Union war effort of Lee's escaping unscathed in such a case might have been devastating. But it would seem from his remarks to General Trimble at Chambersburg that Lee had not moved his army north for the purpose of plunder. Believing his troops to be invincible, Lee was seeking the battle of annihilation that had eluded him on the Peninsula, at Second Manassas, and at Chancellorsville. If the Army of the Potomac could be destroyed or severely crippled in Pennsylvania, would it not be reasonable to antici-

75. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, pp. 458, 459.
76. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, p. 251; Hassler, *Crisis as the Crossroads*, pp. 27, 28; Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 672, n. 142.
77. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 3, p. 458.
78. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 239.

pate the war-weary Union bowing to the inevitable? If that kind of victory could be won here in the heart of the enemy's country, so close to his capital, what difference would it make if Vicksburg fell? Thus, if the Federals had withdrawn towards Pipe Creek it seems likely that Lee would have followed, seeking to land the knockout blow that he was convinced would achieve independence for the Confederacy.

"For all his willingness to fight," comments his sympathetic biographer Edward Nichols, "Reynolds was not rash. He had no stomach for going into battles blind. As of this June 30 evening he knew too little about Lee's positions while knowing only too well the scattered locations of the various corps under Meade."[79] This last sentence is only half correct. Reynolds was, in fact, apprised of the scattered condition of his own army, but it cannot be reasonably maintained, after reading Buford's Message 7, that he had little knowledge of Confederate dispositions. So that, in fact, he was not going blindly into this fight, but with his eyes wide open, knowing that he was facing Confederates in numbers that his available troops might be unable to hold back.

Reynolds' conduct was questioned by two correspondents who reported on the battle for different New York newspapers. L. L. Crounse of *The Times* filed a report stating: "In Wednesday's fight we were repulsed, simply because we were overpowered and outflanked. We fell back to the rear of Gettysburg, and held that position. The action was not general, and was not intended to be by Gen. Meade. It was brought on by Gen. Reynolds, under the impression that his force exceeded that of the enemy."[80] *The Herald*'s reporter, G. W. Hosmer, was more critical: "After our retirement on the town the rebel advance was not pressed further. And so ended a battle that was brought on in the most rash manner, yet which was well fought against a largely superior force, and gotten out of at last much better than we could have expected to get out."[81]

Col. Thomas L. Livermore, in a 1912 speech to the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, was unsparing in his criticism:

> It was entirely possible for [Reynolds] to have retired on the rest of the army in compliance with his instructions, drawing back Buford after him, without the risk of disaster, and there was no merit in the position he took for a general battle. It was vulnerable to approach on the roads from the northeast by the enemy of whose presence in that direction he had been informed, and in it he was beyond possible support by any adequate force. The disregard of Meade's order must be laid to the ardor of a very martial soldier, and the revolt of a patriot against the delivery of an important town of his native State to the enemy.[82]

Confederate partisan leader John S. Mosby wrote after the war:

> Gettysburg offered no offensive or defensive advantages. . . . Some writers have said it was a place of military importance because it was the center from which so many roads radiated. That was the very thing that made it weak and untenable. It was so easy to approach it from any direction and turn it. An army on the Ridge had a tactical advantage in an attack on its front, but the attacking force had the choice of turning its flanks.[83]

John H. Calef, who, as a lieutenant, had commanded Battery A, 2nd U.S. Artillery, which fired the first Federal cannon rounds of the battle, wrote as follows:

> With regard to the positions of the First and Eleventh Corps, covering the approaches to Gettysburg from Chambersburg and York, a close inspection of the routes and terrain will prove what a difficult tactical problem was presented and how hard it was for those troops to hold their ground against the deployments of superior numbers. By a glance at the map it will be seen that from Gettysburg as a center, many roads radiate, viz: Those leading to Taneytown, Emmitsburg, Fairfield, Hagerstown, Chambersburg, Mummasburg, Carlisle, Harrisburg, and Hanover. Guarding those leading from Chambersburg and York, the troops must be disposed on lines facing west and north, forming a salient order of battle, a very weak one, and which is open to the objections that the fire is eccentric, that the two faces are exposed to enfilade fire, that an opening out at the angle presents the flanks to attack, and the retreat of one wing compromises the safety of the other. That is precisely what happened, and in the battle of this day each one of the objections noted received its illustration. An opening occurring between the right [of] the First Corps and the left of the Eleventh, Rodes' division penetrated there, turning both flanks and initiating the retrograde movement. The retirement of the Eleventh Corps exposed the rear of the First, and the artillery of [A. P.] Hill enfiladed the lines of the Eleventh Corps, while that of Ewell

79. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, p. 195.
80. *New York Times*, July 4, 1863.
81. *New York Herald*, July 3, 1863.
82. Ken Bandy and Florence Freeland, eds., *The Gettysburg Papers*, 2 vols. (Dayton, Ohio: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 1:118.
83. John S. Mosby, *Stuart's Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1908), p. 93.

operated in the same manner against those of the First Corps.

Then again, each one of the many roads meeting at the town, like the spokes of a wheel, presented an avenue for outflanking. If the lines were deployed, covering *all* the approaches, they would be everywhere weak. If concentrated to guard the *main* roads, a flank would be presented as well as a conspicuous target for the opposing artillery. Yet another feature of the terrain is to be noted, and that is, the Confederates occupied higher ground, from which they had a commanding and concentric fire on the Union position of this day's fight.[84]

As Reynolds watched Buford's men slowly giving ground to the attacking Heth, he might have thought of Meade's words in Message 8 stating that it was his desire ". . . to look to his own army, and assume position for offensive or defensive, as occasion requires, or rest to the troops." What Reynolds may have thought about resting the troops while Rebels were overrunning southern Pennsylvania may be gleaned from General Doubleday's book on the campaign:

> Reynolds had the true spirit of a soldier. He was a Pennsylvanian, and, inflamed at seeing the devastation of his native State, was most desirous of getting at the enemy as soon as possible. I speak from my own knowledge, for I was his second in command, and he told me at Poolesville, soon after crossing the river, that it was necessary to attack the enemy at once, to prevent his plundering the whole state. As he had *great confidence in his men.* [emphasis added] it was not difficult to divine what his decision would be. He determined to advance and hold Gettysburg.[85]

Biographer Edward Nichols explains Reynolds' actions as follows: "The best way of bringing his old friend around to a choice was to leave him none. Go in, hang on, then inform headquarters that its army was engaged in a battle."[86] Edwin Coddington's thoughts are also of interest:

> Reynolds' actions in the last moments of his life and his message to Meade showed his determination to force a major engagement at Gettysburg. *With barely a third of his corps immediately available, and confronting a force of unknown size* [emphasis added] he had put himself at the head of his troops to lead them in a vigorous attack. Personal leadership of this kind, though considered rash by many people, conformed to Reynolds' temperament and his philosophy of command.[87]

Reynolds' determination to fight at Gettysburg shows through in the statement, made after the war by Capt. James Hall, commander of the 2nd Maine Battery that reached the field with Wadsworth's division. Hall's account makes considerably more sense if it is understood that these words passed between Buford and Reynolds close to Moritz Tavern, to which Buford and a small escort had ridden early on the morning of July 1.[88] Hall wrote:

United States Army Military History Institute
Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard

> As to the selection of the position, Reynolds was the man. . . . Early on July 1st I heard Buford say, "Reynolds, I have run upon some regiments of infantry near Gettysburg,—they are in the woods; I am unable to dislodge them." Reynolds at once dictated a message to General Meade in my hearing, something like this: "Buford just now reports that he finds a small force of the enemy's infantry in a point of woods near Gettysburg, which he is unable to dislodge, and while I am aware that it is not your desire to force an engagement at that point, still I feel at liberty to advance and develop the strength of the enemy." I was at Reynolds' side for some little time at Seminary Ridge, having gone ahead of my battery at his request, and I rode from Semi-

84. "Gettysburg Notes: The Opening Gun," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, vol. 40 (1907), pp. 52, 53.
85. Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1882) p. 122.
86. Nichols, *Toward Gettysburg*, p. 211.
87. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, p. 277.
88. Shue, *Morning at Willoughby Run*, p. 52.

nary Ridge out to the position taken by my guns, some half-mile beyond the ridge, by his side, and all his remarks and appearance gave me the impression that he had gone there to stay.[89]

What was the key to Reynolds' thinking? Why did he fight rather than withdraw? Abner Doubleday may not have been the most accurate chronicler of the war, but his statements concerning Reynolds' temperament have the solid ring of truth and may well be the final answer to our puzzle. Reynolds was, above all else, a *combat* commander. Everything we have learned of him supports this assertion, whether his going to the skirmish line at Fredericksburg to supervise withdrawal of a battery, or being close enough to the front line to be killed by a minié ball, which was his fate at Gettysburg.

Might this be a possible reason for his refusal, on one and perhaps two occasions, of the army command? Commanding generals must fight by way of delegation; they normally do not come within sight of skirmish lines. Whether Reynolds' inability to delegate was good or bad is a moot point. There can be no question that he was possessed of a natural aggressiveness, as was Lee, and that, also like Lee, he had the highest confidence in his men.

If Reynolds was concerned about morale in these last critical moments, he was probably not giving much weight to the adverse effects withdrawal would have on the army. He was much more likely to be thinking of his First Corps. Coddington notes, in speaking of morale, that while the Eleventh Corps "... lacked that indefinable something ... the First Corps was suffused with it. ... Although other able commanders such as Hooker and Meade had shared in its development, the First Corps was the creation of Reynolds, who had molded it into an efficient fighting machine. He was proud of it, and his pride rubbed off onto his men."[90] And if the First Corps was the cream of the Army of the Potomac, Wadsworth's division was the crème de la crème; its First Brigade, including regiments from Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana, universally referred to as the "Iron Brigade," was destined to be hailed as one of the army's most renowned fighting units.

At this point one might question the accuracy of Colonel Wainwright's previously quoted statement that Reynolds said he was not expecting a fight on July 1. Wadsworth's First Division had led the corps march on June 30—under normal procedures it would have surrendered that preferred position to one of the other two divisions for the next day's march. Doubleday's orders had, in fact, placed the Third Division in the lead for July 1, with Wadsworth's division bringing up the rear. Reynolds, when he learned of this arrangement, switched positions, putting the First Division back in front.[91] If he had anticipated trouble ahead, it would have been natural for him to place his best unit in the vanguard.

Thus the First Corps, the men Reynolds knew best, would be first to meet the advancing enemy. And Wadsworth's division, because of Reynolds' direct intervention in the marching orders, would make the initial contact: Reynolds knew Buford, and undoubtedly would have expected Buford's horse soldiers to put up stiff resistance. So the army's best infantry were marching to aid the army's best commanded cavalry. It would seem that all these factors would bode well for the Federals in the action about to open.

To summarize briefly the events of July 1, the three First Corps divisions eventually established a west-facing line along McPherson's Ridge and north of the Chambersburg road. Howard's Eleventh Corps arrived after Reynolds was killed, and set up a north-facing line that never connected with the First Corps. The problem with Howard's line was that it was not anchored to any significant terrain features. The combat of the First Day would eventually pit 19,300 Federals against about 25,600 Confederates.[92] Rebel attacks from the west by the divisions of Heth and Pender, from the north by Rodes' division, and from the northeast by the division of Early, finally drove the Federals from their positions and through the town to Cemetery Hill, where they rallied. The Confederates failed to follow up their initial advantage, principally due to alleged lack of aggressiveness on the part of Generals Ewell and A. P. Hill.[93] Both armies then rushed to the field, ensuring that the combat would be renewed on the morrow.

The Eleventh Corps had been under a cloud since its collapse at Chancellorsville, and its reputation was not redeemed at Gettysburg. In defense of this most unlucky organization, it should be noted that the position it occupied at Gettysburg on July 1 was not a strong one. The Eleventh probably did as well as any other unit would have done under similar circumstances. There is ample eveidence, however, that the First Corps' resistance was extraordinarliy tenacious.

Col. Henry Morrow of the Iron Brigade's 24th Michigan was wounded and captured during the withdrawal from McPherson's Ridge. He later wrote in his report: "During the time I was a prisoner I conversed freely with distinguished rebel officers in relation to the battle on the 1st instant, and, without exception, they spoke in terms of admiration of the conduct of our troops, and especially of that of the troops composing the First Army Corps. One of them informed me that Lieut. Gen. A. P. Hill said he had never known the Federals to fight so well."[94]

It must be understood that my contention is not that Reynolds disobeyed Meade's orders. These orders were, as we have seen, discretionary. But if the McPherson's Ridge position was untenable, which it was, and if the ground north of Gettysburg offered no good defensive possibilities, which it did not, then for Reynolds to attempt a delaying action against an enemy whose strength in the immediate area he knew *could* have been overwhelming was to take an unacceptable risk. The fact that Reynolds accepted the risk and got away with it makes

89. Joseph G. Rosengarten, *Reynolds Memorial* (Addresses), (Philadelphia, 1880).
90. Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, pp. 306, 307.
91. *Ibid.*, pp. 261, 262.
92. Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths*, pp. 23-28, 30, 81-83, 85-87, 158-60, 162, 164-69, 174-78, 180-84.
93. Douglas S. Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 3:90-105.
94. *OR*, vol. 27, pt. 1, p. 272.

July 1, 1863, the luckiest and unluckiest day of his life, which would end in the first moments of the infantry combat.

So the Federal position, on which Lee would dash his army to ruin over the next two days, was preserved. The First Corps lived up to its reputation, and perhaps saved that of Reynolds, as well. Reynolds' death, together with the Union triumph at Gettysburg, effectively eliminated all subsequent criticism of his decision to fight there. But looking at those first moments when the armies came together, could it not be said that the Union cause might never have been in greater jeopardy during the war than when Reynolds determined to save "the heights beyond the town"?

As everyone knows, the heights were saved. What is not so well known is the amount of blood that was shed to save them. The butchery of July 1 was incredible. The First Corps was irretrievably wrecked, its losses totaling close to 5,800 men, while the Eleventh Corps sustained nearly 3,200 casualties. The four Confederate divisions, relentlessly attacking, lost approximately 7,700 dead, wounded, or missing.[95]

For whatever reasons, the actions of the First Day have always been overshadowed by the events of July 2 and 3. The Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, Little Round Top, Culp's Hill, and Pickett's Charge are all well known pieces of the Gettysburg mosaic. But we should not forget McPherson's (Herbst) Woods, where the 24th Michigan took terrible losses in desperate fighting.[96] And Forney's Field, where Brig. Gen. Alfred Iverson sent his Confederate brigade toward a stone wall in ignorance of Brig. Gen. Henry Baxter's Union brigade hiding behind it, whereupon the Federals rose up and fired several volleys, downing five hundred men in a few minutes.[97] And Lt. James Stewart's Battery B, 4th U.S. Artillery, which, with infantry assistance, savaged Confederate Brig. Gen. Alfred Scales' attacking brigade.[98]

The sun would finally set on the wreckage of the First Day. Forty-eight more hours of bloodletting lay ahead for the antagonists, locked together now in an embrace that neither could escape. But soon the armies would fade away to the south, never to return, leaving the field to history.

In time Abraham Lincoln would come to this ground that John Reynolds had chosen to defend and, in a two-minute speech, would make plain, for every succeeding generation, the meaning of it all.

---

95. Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, pp. 141-51, makes a good effort to isolate the casualties for July 1 from losses sustained by the same units on July 2 and 3.
96. R. Lee Hadden, "The Deadly Embrace: The Meeting of the Twenty-fourth Regiment, Michigan Infantry and the Twenthy-sixth Regiment of North Carolina Troops at McPherson's Woods, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1, 1863," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 5 (July 1991): 19-33; Tucker, *High Tide*, pp. 139-52.
97. Gerard A. Patterson, "The Death of Iverson's Brigade," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 5 (July 1991): 13-18; Gary G. Lash, "Brig. Gen. Henry Baxter's Brigade at Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 10 (January 1994): 7-27; Hassler, *Crisis at the Crossroads*, pp. 90-98.
98. Silas Felton, "The Iron Brigade Battery at Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 11 (July 1994): 57-65.